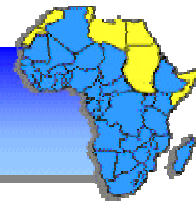




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HEALTH MINISTERS RENEW COMMITMENT TO ACTION ON HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

29 AUGUST 2002

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A meeting of health ministers from southern African countries and senior officials of WHO ended Wednesday in Harare, Zimbabwe, with delegates from participating countries renewing their "political commitment for immediate actions with a view to mitigating the health consequences" of the humanitarian crisis facing the region.

A report issued at the end of the meeting said that the ministers "indicated the importance of a strategic response which recognizes the multi-dimensional nature of the current crisis, and which responds effectively to people's priority needs."

The ministers highlighted the need for: strong government stewardship of health action; streamlining (or modifying) normal procedures to secure more rapid and efficient actions; building new alliances with relevant partners, in close co-operation with governments, and working within agreed strategies; and rapid response "flying squad" health teams who link health care with food distribution and respond quickly to needs of un-served areas.

On ensuring basic food rations for all affected by the crisis, the ministers underscored the need to: identify nutritional needs and ensure the supply of food and supplements containing the nutrients that are vital for health (paying particular attention to the needs of the most vulnerable groups. Also stressed was the need to provide information on the safety of different food items, including Genetically Modified varieties that are provided as food aid.

They identified the key interventions or lifelines in dealing with the crisis as:

- ▶ Seeking to ensure adequate supplies of clean water (and chlorine tablets for disinfection at the local level);
- ▶ Ensuring that health systems function effectively in tackling priorities and are accessible to those who need them;
- ▶ Enabling people in need to access essential medicines, commodities, services and community support to prevent HIV/AIDS and maintain reproductive health (especially among young people) together with the provision of care (including appropriate anti-retroviral medicines within public hospitals) for people living

with HIV/ AIDS, and the prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV

- ▶ Making available therapeutic food for the malnourished, for people living with AIDS, and for the elderly
- ▶ Measles and other priority vaccines, logistics and effective vaccination programmes
- ▶ Obstetric Care supplies and accessible services
- ▶ Distribution of insecticide-treated mosquito nets alongside other interventions that are being provided for affected communities

In order to get the lifelines to the people in need, the ministers indicated that it would be necessary to have a rapid and regular monitoring of people' health and nutritional status (including outbreaks of disease and the safety of food), together with early warning of threats to health. It would also be necessary to have in place facilities, including laboratory services, for managing epidemics as well as adequate communications equipment and procedures for information exchange. Special efforts -- including consideration of extra benefits -- would also have to be made to reflect the value of health staff and keep key staff in place.

The ministers agreed that WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA and other international agencies in the UN country team should seek additional resources for in-country health action; reprogramme the use of existing resources in-country; strengthen sub-regional team to support national authorities in nutrition, epidemiology, communicable disease, water and sanitation and; work in close strategic partnership with bilateral donors and NGOs, ensuring effective co-ordination.

They also requested WHO to offer authoritative technical guidance on Genetically Modified Foods, and help countries receiving these foods to make informed decisions about their use.

The ministers reviewed the report of the expert meeting which preceded the ministerial forum, provided additional information on country-specific health needs and discussed coordination of partners and governments in support to people in affected areas.

In closing the meeting, WHO Director General, Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, said: "We have focused on priorities in a strategic way, identifying immediate needs and agreeing what needs to be done. We have recognized the importance of HIV/AIDS in the crisis and have charted out a course of action together." She stressed the need to reach people in need with essential food, to make adequate supply of clean water a priority, and to ensure that health systems delivered accessible essential health care to affected people. "We can achieve these objectives through effective partnerships - through countries working closely with the UN, donor agencies and NGOs towards this common cause. We will now work harder than ever to mobilize resources so as to intensify our efforts quickly", Dr Brundtland said.

The three-day meeting which examined the health sector response to the acute and large-scale humanitarian crisis facing Southern Africa was attended by Ministers or Deputy Ministers of Health from Angola, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, and Zimbabwe, the Deputy Minister of Local Government from Botswana. and the personal representative of the Minister of Health from Malawi.

together with the Executive Director of UNICEF, and representatives of concerned national and international organizations.

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